

This Far From the Borderline by glorious_spoon

Series: [Into the Rift \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Friendship, Hurt/Comfort, Monsters, Multi, Mystery, Pre-Relationship, Rescue, Supernatural Elements

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson

Status: Completed

Published: 2018-01-27

Updated: 2018-02-04

Packaged: 2022-04-20 16:36:28

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 4

Words: 14,407

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Steve Harrington graduated from high school on June 8, 1985. Two weeks later, he vanished without a trace.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Title from [Twilight Zone](#) by Golden Earring.

Steve graduated from high school on June 8, 1985. He crossed the stage in a cheap black polyester cap and gown, accepted his diploma and shook hands with Principal Rashaad, then turned and flipped his hand up to wave at the sea of people parked in folding chairs facing the stage under a heavy gray summer sky. He could make out a few faces he knew—Dustin, beaming up at him from the second row from under a ball-cap while the rest of the party shoved and whispered at each other, his mom and dad sitting a few rows back, and, surprisingly, Nancy and Jonathan at the outer edges. Jonathan had his camera looped on its strap around his neck, but he wasn't taking pictures right now; Nancy was beside him in a pretty blouse and knee-length skirt, twisted back in her chair to talk to someone in the row behind her.

He wasn't expecting them to stick around afterward, but they did. After his mom hugged him tearily and his dad pressed a fat envelope of cash into his hand, after Dustin all but tackled him, yelling, "Steve, you're a *high school graduate* now, that's practically like an adult—"

After that, Nancy and Jonathan were still there. Nancy smiled up at him, and then, to his surprise, went up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. For a moment, his nose was full of the scent of her shampoo. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," Steve said, slightly nonplussed. Jonathan was standing awkwardly behind her. He looked more than a little uncomfortable in his light gray suit, his tie slightly crooked and his hair pushed haphazardly behind his ears, but his smile was genuine enough. "Hey, Jonathan. Photographing the ceremony?"

"Something like that," Jonathan said, and after a moment, stuck out his hand. "Congratulations."

Surprised, Steve took it. Jonathan's hand was dry and warm, his grip

surprisingly strong. His sleeve was just slightly too short, riding up to show the bony knob of his wrist. It was weirdly endearing. “Thank you.”

“Well,” Jonathan said, letting go of his hand. “I should probably go talk to Ms. Rashaad, I think she wanted pictures of the band—”

“Sure, cool. See you guys later.” Steve nodded, and they turned to go. He lifted his head to scan the crowd— he was pretty sure there was at least one aunt here that he hadn’t hugged— and then Jonathan called his name.

He turned to look, a question on his lips, and a flash went off in his face. Jonathan lowered the camera, grinning crookedly.

“Was that really necessary?” Steve asked, trying to sound annoyed and pretty sure he hadn’t managed it at all.

“Candid shots are better,” Jonathan informed him, still grinning, and then slipped back into the crowd before he could respond.

Two weeks later, Steve Harrington vanished without a trace.

His parents weren’t the first ones to notice. Neither was Jonathan, or Nancy. In fact, his disappearance might have gone completely unremarked on for days if Dustin hadn’t happened to be talking on the phone with him at the exact moment it happened.

“—so anyway,” he was saying, “it’s going to be my first time DMing, I have the whole thing worked out, it’s going to blow Mike’s quests out of the water, but you have to come, dude—”

“I don’t *have* to do anything, dipshit,” Steve said, but he sounded fond. “Yeah, okay. As long as it’s not going to take the entire weekend this...”

His voice trailed off suddenly into staticky silence.

“Steve?” Dustin asked, after a moment.

More silence. Just when Dustin was about to hang up and redial, Steve said softly, and not entirely into the phone, “What the *fuck*.”

“Steve?” Dustin asked again, feeling a spike of fear go through the back of his throat, making his voice come out thin and nervous. “Steve, is something wrong?”

“Shit,” Steve said vehemently, and then, “Dustin, call—”

He never finished the sentence. Instead, there was a shriek of static that made Dustin jerk the phone away from his ear, and then a sound, an awful, howling sound like a thousand inhuman voices calling out at once in some unspeakable tongue. And then, very suddenly, silence.

Dustin took a deep breath, then let it out. “Steve? Are you there?”

Silence.

“Steve?” Still no answer. He pressed the lever to end the call, then dialed Steve’s number again. Busy signal. Again. No answer.

“Shit,” he muttered, “shit, shit, god damn it.”

His mom ducked her head into the hallway on her way to the kitchen to tsk at him. “Language, Dustin.”

“Sorry, Mom,” he said, automatically. His voice sounded normal to him, but his mom came to a sudden halt, then stepped all the way into the hallway. Her hands were full of a week’s worth of dirty dishes that he kept forgetting to bring out of his bedroom. Normally, that would have earned him a lecture, but right now she just looked concerned.

“Is everything okay, sweetheart?”

“Fine, Mom, it’s great, it’s fine,” Dustin said, and scooped the stack of plates out of her hands. “Here, let me take those. I have to go, uh—project for science camp due Monday, I just remembered I left my stuff at Steve’s house, is that okay?”

“Of course,” she said, her brow furrowing as she followed him into

the kitchen. He dumped the plates in the sink with a careless clatter of porcelain. "Dustin, be careful with the dishes! Good grief."

"Sorry, sorry," he said, grabbing a handful of packaged cookies from the top of the fridge and shoving them in his pockets. "I'll just—"

"Be back by dark, please," his mom said.

"Yep. Definitely. See you later, love you, bye." He kissed her cheek and all but ran out the door.

Steve's house was a little over a mile away, and Dustin pedaled as fast as he could, his heart pounding, wishing he'd thought to grab the radio from his bedroom. Too late now. The five minutes it took to get to Steve's fancy neighborhood felt like an eon. He came to a screeching halt at the front walk, flung himself up the steps, and pounded on the door. "Steve!"

For a moment, he let himself imagine that Steve would open the door and quirk a baffled eyebrow at him, that it was just some stupid problem with the phone, that everything was *fine* and Dustin was totally overreacting. That would be okay. Steve would probably give him shit about it until the end of time, but it would be okay. It would be fine. The alternative was something he could barely bring himself to consider.

Nobody came to the door. Steve's car was parked in the driveway, and the lights were on inside, and nobody came to the door. Dustin knocked again. "Hey, Steve! Anybody home?"

No answer. Dustin glanced behind him at the empty street, then tried the knob. It was unlocked. "Steve?" he called again, ducking his head inside. "Hello?"

The entry hall was silent and empty. He crept down it, heart pounding. The phone at the end of the hallway was off the hook, dangling by its cord almost to the floor. Beside it was a can of soda, overturned on the pale carpet and surrounded by splatter marks, like it had been dropped from some height.

Like someone had been holding it, standing at the phone, and then suddenly let go. Or disappeared.

“Shit,” Dustin whispered. “Oh, son of a bitch, Steve, where are you?”

He picked up the phone and held it to his ear, but it was just a tinny dial tone. He set it in the cradle and spun slowly in place, peering at the empty kitchen, the empty hallway, the empty living room. Empty, empty, empty. Steve was nowhere to be seen.

Dustin searched the entire house from top to bottom, from the spotless and clearly unused exercise room in the basement to the attic packed with dusty boxes, from Steve’s room, which he’d been in a few times before, to his parents’ master suite, which he definitely hadn’t. It was a ridiculously huge house, with lots of places to hide, and he searched every last one of them like he thought (hoped) that Steve might just pop up from behind a sofa or a closet door and laugh, and ruffle his hair, and tell him that he was just messing with him.

He wound up, eventually, back in the entry hall, next to the sticky puddle of cola soaking into the carpet.

“If you’re messing with me, I’m going to kill you,” he said out loud. “I mean it, Steve.”

There was no answer. Dustin let out a shaky breath. There was a sick, familiar fear churning in his gut.

Steve wasn’t messing with him. Steve was *gone*.

Lucas was at his grandmother’s house for the week and nobody at Mike’s was picking up. Dustin knew better than to try to call Max when her stepdad (or worse, Billy) might be home. He tried calling the station, but the Chief wasn’t in. Florence took a message, sounding both skeptical and put-upon, but it was anyone’s guess how long it would take before the Chief actually got it.

Finally, he dialed Will’s number. It rang three times, and then a

woman's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Byers?" Dustin asked. And— right, Mrs. Byers actually knew what was going on, he didn't have to make something up, he could just *tell* her. The relief was enormous. She was a grown-up. She'd know what to do. "Is Will there? Is he okay?"

"Dustin?" she asked, her voice sharpening. "Will's here, he's fine. Honey, what happened? Are you okay?"

"I—" Dustin blew out a breath, staring at the cola spill on the carpet like it was a bloodstain, or at least something a lot more ominous than sticky brown sugar-syrup. It *felt* a lot more ominous, for sure. "I'm at Steve's house. He's gone. I think something took him."

She was quiet long enough to make him wonder if their connection had dropped (or worse; what if it was something in the *phones*, what if it took her too? Jesus, if he got Will's mom eaten by something in the Upside-Down, Will was never going to forgive him), and then she said, briskly, "Okay. Dustin, sweetie, I think you'd better get over here. You can tell us everything else then."

Dustin nodded, forgetting that she couldn't see him. *Us. Us* was good. "Okay. Okay, yeah."

"Are you okay? Do you want me to come get you?"

"No, I— No. I'm okay, I'll bring my bike. See you soon."

"Be careful," she said sternly, and disconnected the call.

"Missing?" Nancy said sharply. "What do you mean he's missing?"

"I. Don't. Know," Dustin said, punctuating each word sharply, like he was already sick of telling this story. He was hunched over the kitchen table while Joyce hovered anxiously by the stove, wound as tight as a wire with frustration and anxiety. "I was on the phone with him, and he said he saw something, and there was this *noise*, like screaming, and then he was gone. I went over to his house, and he was gone. Okay? He was just gone."

“And you’re sure he didn’t just go somewhere?” Jonathan asked. His cold fingers slipped into hers, and when she glanced up at him, his face was pale and tense. He wasn’t quite looking at Will, who was lingering in the doorway with an expression she couldn’t read, but his body was angled in that direction.

It made sense that this would hit home for Jonathan. It wasn’t as easy to explain the horrible, sickening anxiety knotting itself into the pit of her stomach. Nonsensically, she remembered that awful party, spitting accusations in Steve’s face through a haze of alcohol, *We killed Barb, we killed Barb and we’re pretending everything’s okay.*

It wasn’t that she didn’t know she still cared for Steve. But somehow she wasn’t expecting this feeling, like the bottom had dropped out of her world.

“No,” Dustin said, hunching in on himself even more. “I’m not sure about anything, man, but his car was there, and he wasn’t there, and he wouldn’t mess with me like that. Not Steve.”

“You said,” Nancy said, through numb lips. “You said you heard screaming. Was it—”

“It wasn’t Steve,” Dustin interrupted. “It wasn’t— it didn’t sound human.”

That wasn’t actually better. She remembered the awful sounds the demogorgon had made, shrieks that no human throat could produce.

But there was no blood. Dustin had said there was no blood. If a demogorgon had got Steve, there would have been blood. Lots of it.

We killed Barb, she thought, and there had been no blood by the pool that night either. Barb had been alive when she was pulled into the Upside-Down. Just because Steve had been alive when he disappeared didn’t mean he was still—

No. She squeezed Jonathan’s fingers tighter, and he squeezed back. No. Steve was alive. Steve was fine, and they were going to get him back.

“We should talk to Jane,” Will said quietly from the door.

Nancy stared at him for a second before it clicked. Eleven. Mike's girlfriend, the one with the powers. The one who had found Will, who had closed the portal, who had saved them all.

"Right," Dustin said, perking up. "Right, definitely! She'll know what to do. I couldn't remember the number for the Chief's cabin, he wasn't at the station—"

"I have it," Joyce said, crossing the room to pick up the phone. She dialed the number from memory, then stood with her back to them, one hand resting on her hip. "Jim?"

"Is he there?" Dustin whispered loudly.

"Hush," Nancy said.

Joyce spoke quietly into the phone for a few minutes, too quiet for Nancy to make out more than a few words, then hung up and turned back toward them, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and starting to pack it against the heel of her hand. "They're on their way. Dustin, does your mom know you're here?"

Dustin shrugged. "She thinks I'm at Steve's. As long as I'm back before dark, it should be fine."

"Okay." Joyce nodded decisively. "Okay. I'll— is anyone hungry? I can get some sandwiches together, I think we have ham and turkey, and, and—"

"Mom," Jonathan said quietly, and it was only then that Nancy noticed Joyce's fluttering hands, the tightness of her voice and the tenseness of her shoulders, the way her face seemed drawn sharply across the bones. "I'll get the stuff. Okay?"

Joyce nodded, and patted his shoulder, and dropped into a kitchen chair to light a cigarette with shaking fingers. "Of course. Thank you, sweetie."

Jonathan let go of Nancy's hand, and she curled her fingers in, feeling weirdly cold and bereft. He glanced over at Will, some sort of wordless big-brother command, and Will came into the room and put his arm around his mother's shoulders. She hugged him back tightly.

"I'm sorry," she said, slightly muffled. Will rested his cheek against the top of her head and closed his eyes. His expression was still distant and strange, and he didn't answer.

"It's okay, Mom," Jonathan said, and went to start pulling sandwich supplies out of the fridge.

It seemed like a long time later when Hopper's Blazer pulled up the driveway. Nancy and Jonathan went out onto the porch as he cut the engine, Dustin trailing behind. Hopper was out of uniform, wearing a ball-cap and a red flannel shirt that made him look like a lumberjack. Jane looked like something out of an MTV video, her dark hair slicked back and liner smeared messily around her eyes, black jeans rolled up over a pair of shiny dark boots. It was hard to imagine an odder pair, but they fell into step easily as they approached the porch.

"What happened?" Hopper asked, squinting up at them. "Joyce was a little light on the details."

Jane came to a halt at the bottom of the porch steps, surveying them through strange, calm eyes. Finally, quietly, she said, "He's gone."

Hopper cut her a glance. "Gone? Who's gone?"

"Steve," Jonathan said. His hand found Nancy's again.

"Yeah," Dustin said, and shouldered his way past them. "El— Jane, I mean, he's missing, he disappeared, and you have to find him, okay?"

Jane stared at him for several moments, then nodded wordlessly and started up the stairs. Hopper squinted at her, then at Nancy and Jonathan like one of them might have answers, then shrugged resignedly and followed.

Jane's eyes were moving fitfully beneath the heavily painted lids; the rest of her face was masklike, like the face of a porcelain doll incongruously cupped by giant noise-cancelling headphones, like the kinds that airplane pilots used. God knew where Hopper had even

found those things.

Nancy dug her fingers into the meat of her thigh, glancing around the living room. Late afternoon sunlight was filtering in through the yellowed blinds. By the kitchen table, Joyce was smoking a third cigarette, Will tucked up against her side, wide-eyed and silent. Jonathan looked as wired tense as she felt, and Dustin was all but dancing from foot to foot. Only the Chief looked calm.

"How long is this going to take?" she whispered, glancing over at him. The silence seemed heavy, charged, like the calm before a storm.

"It'll take as long as it takes," he said.

"But—"

"Shh."

Nancy opened her mouth to speak, and then Jane let out a soft gasp, her whole body convulsing, and yanked the headphones off of her ears. They clattered to the floor, the sudden sound shockingly loud, and Jonathan leaned forward like a bloodhound on a trail.

"Well?" he asked tightly.

Jane took a slow breath, and then opened her eyes and looked around, slightly dazed, like a sleepwalker waking from a trance. "He's gone."

Something icy and sharp and horrible cracked open in Nancy's heart. *He's gone*, and suddenly it was last year, sitting on the floor of the gym while a little girl in a buzzcut and her old dress sobbed *gone, gone, gone, GONE*, into the silent air, and Barb was dead and she'd never, ever see her again—

—and *Steve*—

"Gone?" Jonathan whispered, and what she heard in his voice was an echo of that same horrible thing.

"What do you mean, gone?" Hopper asked bluntly. "Is he dead?"

Some part of Nancy wanted to hit him. The rest of her was full of an awful sort of gratitude. Someone needed to ask, and she couldn't make her mouth form the words.

Jane shook her head slowly. "No."

"No? He's alive?"

"I don't know." Jane shook her head, and suddenly her eyes were welling up with tears, and she didn't look like a punk rocker from MTV or an alien oracle; all of a sudden she just looked like a kid, like a little girl who didn't have any more answers than they did. "I don't know, he's *gone*, I couldn't find him at all. It's all dark. I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*."

"Hey," Hopper said, and reached out to pull her into a rough, one-armed hug. "Hey, kid, it's okay. You did your best. We'll figure this out, okay?"

"Yeah," Nancy said, and reached for Jonathan's hand again, tangling their fingers together. Gone was better than dead. Gone meant that he could be found again. "We'll find him."

They were damn well *going* to find him.

He woke to darkness.

His bare feet were resting on some smooth, cold, damp surface. He was standing, though he didn't know how; it was like he had simply materialized into being like this, in this place. The air around him was still, the blackness absolute. When he held a hand up before his face, he couldn't make out the shapes of his own fingers. He might as well have been floating in a limitless void, anchored only by whatever the hell it was he was standing on.

"Hello?" Steve called. His voice seemed small, muffled, like it had been swallowed up by the darkness itself. "Dustin? Anybody? Hello?"

Nothing. No answer, not even the echo of his own voice. The last thing he remembered—

The last thing he remembered was Dustin's voice in his ear, spinning the phone cord idly around his finger and watching a squirrel through the kitchen window. And then, an impossible rip in thin air, leaking blackness and inhuman screams, had opened up in the middle of his parents' hallway and swallowed him whole.

Steve rubbed a hand over his face, feeling his heart begin to speed, and pinched the inside of his wrist viciously. Then again, digging his nails into the soft skin until he wouldn't have been surprised if he was drawing blood, trying to shock himself awake and out of here. Nothing changed. Darkness pressed in on him from every side.

His breathing was starting to get ragged, panicky, scraping at his throat. He spun in place, peering into the blackness. There could be anything out there. Anything at all, and he wouldn't know it until it was on him. His fingers itched for the nail bat. Any moment now, he expected to feel fetid breath on his face, a tulip-shaped mouth bristling with teeth clamping down on his throat.

There was nothing, though, he realized after several long minutes of trying and mostly failing not to hyperventilate. Nothing happened. No monsters, no demo-dogs, no nothing. He was alone in the endless black. Nothing was coming after him, because nothing was here.

He was alone.

2. Chapter 2

“So,” Dustin said, slamming a stack of books down on the table hard enough to make all five of them jump. “How much do you guys know about the Multiverse Theory?”

“The what?” Max asked, peering at the cover of the top book, which was decorated with a white line-art cat on a background of starry darkness. “*In Search of Schrödinger’s Cat*? Where did you get these?”

“College library,” Dustin said. “Can we focus, please?”

“Don’t you have to be a student to check books out from there?” Lucas asked, looking vaguely scandalized. “Did you steal those?”

“*Borrowed*, I’m going to bring them back, obviously. Guys, come on. Pay attention, this is important.”

“Multiverse theory,” Jane said, reaching out to touch the cover. Her slim, pale finger traced the outline of the cat. “Like the Upside-Down.”

Dustin pointed at her. “Other worlds, exactly.”

“We know there are other worlds, that’s not new,” Mike said. “So what?”

“So, we know it’s not the Upside-Down, Jane closed that, right,” Dustin said. “Nothing can get in or out. But there are *other* worlds. An infinite number of them, actually, it’s really— anyway.”

He flagged visibly. Normally, Dustin was like a runaway train once he got on a scientific tear, but right now he looked pale and tired, like he hadn’t been sleeping much. The shadows beneath his eyes were more like bruises.

Steve Harrington had been missing for three days.

Max was the first one to speak, her voice surprisingly gentle. “An infinite number of worlds?”

Dustin nodded. "Right, so... right. Okay, so most of the math on this is way over my head, and it looks like scientists don't even agree on whether parallel dimensions even exist as anything other than a philosophical concept—"

"We know that they do, though," Lucas said, pulling the book toward him. "The Upside-Down. What's with the cat?"

"Schrödinger's cat. Okay, so it's like a thought experiment? If you put a cat in a box with a radioactive substance that will release a poison if it decays and then close the box, in an hour will the cat be dead or alive? You can't know without opening the box."

"That's messed up," Max said.

"They're not really poisoning cats," Dustin said impatiently. "It's a *thought experiment*. The idea is that the cat exists in both states, because both states are equally probable. Each possibility creates a parallel universe. It's the observer that defines reality."

"Okay," Lucas said after a long moment. He glanced at Mike, then at Jane. "So what does this have to do with Steve?"

It was Will, though, who spoke. "Steve is the cat."

"Exactly."

"So," Mike said, brow furrowing. "So you're saying that Steve is either there or not there based on whether or not he's being observed? But—"

He glanced at Jane, then shut his mouth abruptly.

"But I couldn't find him," she finished. "He wasn't..." She touched the picture of the cat again. "He wasn't in the box."

"Yeah, well," Dustin said. "Maybe that means we're looking in the wrong box."

"Missing? What do you mean he's *missing*?" Fred Harrington's tinny voice echoed down the line, outraged and disbelieving, and Jim

dropped his head into the heel of his hand, wishing, not for the first time, that he hadn't chosen this particular week to cut back on the cigarettes.

Not that any other week would have been better. It was always fucking something in this town, although he'd take infestations of demonically possessed greenery over more missing kids any day.

"Mr. Harrington, at this point, you know as much as we do," he lied tiredly. There was a headache beginning to build in the bones of his skull, making it hard for him to keep a grip on his temper. Harrington was an asshole, but his kid was missing. Chewing his head off wouldn't solve anything, and would just leave him with new problems, mostly in the form of angry phone calls from the mayor. "Steve was last seen on Saturday afternoon. One of his friends reported him missing. Now, we have no reason to suspect foul play, but—"

"But obviously you do," Harrington interrupted angrily. "Otherwise you wouldn't be investigating. Why am I just now being informed of this?"

Because you can't be bothered to check your goddamn messages. "Technically speaking, Steve is an adult, so he couldn't be officially reported missing until 24 hours passed—"

"It's been three days."

"Yeah," Jim said. "It has. We're doing everything we can, believe me."

Harrington's snort spoke volumes about what he thought of that. "We're flying back tomorrow morning, and I *will* be speaking to the mayor about how your department has been handling this."

"Yeah, sure," Jim said. *Asshole.* "Sounds great. I'll be in touch if we have any news before then."

"You'd damn well better be," Harrington said, and hung up. Jim slammed the phone back into the cradle hard enough to make Flo raise her eyebrows at him.

“Sorry,” he sighed.

She pinched her lips together and surveyed him over the rims of her tortoiseshell glasses. “Bad news?”

“No news,” he said. “That was Harrington Senior.”

“Better late than never, I suppose,” Flo said disapprovingly, pulling a stack of typewritten pages toward her. “By the way, Al Newman called this morning. Said someone, and I quote, ‘electrocuted his telephone’. Should I radio Cal?”

“No,” Jim said, heaving himself out of his chair, his knees cracking like dry sticks. Days like this, he felt every last one of his forty-four years hanging off him like a weight. “No, I’ll check it out. That’s over by the Harrington place, right?”

“Across the street,” Flo said, handing him the memo. “Are you sure —”

“I’m heading out that way anyway. I’ll take care of it.”

She eyed him. “You’re going to break into the Harrington house, aren’t you.”

“It’s not breaking in if it’s an active crime scene,” Jim said, and took himself out the door before she could respond.

The door to the Harrington house was still unlocked, and he let himself in silently. There were muddy footprints on the pale carpet, a soda can overturned at the far end, under the telephone. The resultant spill was still faintly tacky to the touch.

Steve had been standing right here when he’d disappeared. Looking out the kitchen window, maybe, or at the framed photos hanging on the wall— professional shots, mostly, Steve Harrington as a wide-eyed moppet beaming at the camera, Steve Harrington wearing a suit and tie and a gravity-defying hairdo in his senior class photo, the three Harringtons in a stiffly formal family picture in front of a generic backdrop of draped cloth—

The air rippled before his eyes, a breath of cold and the smell of electricity.

Jim flinched away with a curse, his back hitting the wall, his palm landing automatically on the grip of his sidearm.

“Who’s there?” he snapped.

There was no response. His hair was standing on end, and he was pretty sure it wasn’t just nerves; there was a charge in the air, like lightning just about to strike. Something crackled, a noise that seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere, and then the phone began to ring.

He snatched it up without even considering that it might just be someone calling for the Harringtons. “Hello?”

Static crackled through the line, and then there was a howling, roaring noise, getting louder and louder, like someone was slowly turning up the volume. Or like something enormous was getting closer.

“Hello?” he said again.

There was another sound now, a raspy, gasping sound. Breathing. Someone was breathing into the other end of the line, fast and panicky.

Jim curled his fingers around the grip of his gun, like *that* was going to do anything. Remembered Joyce, and her strange phone calls when Will had gone missing— “Steve? Hey, kid, is that you?”

A jolt of electricity slammed into him like a hammer, and the line went dead.

Jim set the phone down in the cradle, flexed his stinging hands. The phone itself was untouched, but the tasteful striped wallpaper around it was scorched, and the smell of acrid smoke and electricity lingered in the air.

Well, shit.

Nancy wasn't quite sure how Jonathan had managed to get his hands on a key to the school darkroom over the summer. It was possible that Principal Rashaad or Mr. Quinlan, the art teacher, had actually given it to him, since he'd been hired (for the princely sum of \$25) to take pictures for the school newsletter.

It was equally likely that he'd just stolen it. She didn't ask as she followed him in through the glass doors on the parking lot side of the building. It was cool and dim out of the stifling afternoon, the air conditioners humming quietly, the lights off. The art classroom was a yawning, cavernous space like an airplane hanger, a bank of windows in the far end letting in plenty of light to illuminate stacks of canvasses, half-finished sculpture projects, dismembered mannequins stacked against the wall.

"Do you think the film will show anything?" she asked quietly, as Jonathan unlocked the door to the darkroom.

He shrugged tightly. "I don't know. Are you coming in?"

"Yeah," Nancy said softly, and followed him into the cramped, chemical-scented room, pulling the door shut behind her.

She didn't take photography, but she'd been in here before, with Jonathan. It was a good place to get some privacy as long as there wasn't an art class going on. Nobody else came down here.

"Did you take pictures inside the house, too?" she asked, watching Jonathan set out trays and liquids, moving confidently even in the dim light. He hadn't talked to her before he'd gone to take pictures of Steve's house the night before, which should have stung but somehow didn't. Jonathan had always seemed to see the world more clearly through the lens of a camera. And he'd asked her to come with him now. That was the important thing.

"Yeah."

"Breaking and entering," Nancy said, but the teasing edge to her voice seemed strange and flat. Jonathan smiled slightly anyway.

"The door was unlocked. And anyway if it helps us find him, I think

he'll be okay with it."

"Do you think it will? Help find him, I mean. Did you see anything while you were there?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "No."

"Really?"

"I thought maybe... I don't know. There was something there. Something weird. But it wasn't like the demogorgon, that time—"

Nancy shivered. "What was it, then?"

"I don't know," Jonathan said. "I might have been imagining it." His fingers rested on the roll of film. "You know, some people say that you can see ghosts on film."

"Steve isn't dead," Nancy said, hearing the harshness in her voice but unable to mute it. "He's not a ghost. We're going to get him back."

Jonathan opened his mouth, then shut it, shook his head, and busied himself with measuring developing solution and fixer into the plastic trays. Some angry, frightened part of Nancy wanted to keep pushing, keep jabbing at him until he lost his temper and they could have an awful screaming fight right there in the darkroom, but she resisted. Instead, she shoved her hands in the pockets of her shorts, leaned her hip against the counter, and watched him work.

The first few pictures to emerge were shots of the graduation: the empty chairs set out in rows with the crowd milling around, the stage looming against a cloudy sky, lines of black-clad graduates coming out of the gymnasium doors, a thin beam of sunlight glinting off the instruments of the marching band. There was a shot of Nancy that she hadn't even realized he'd taken, her face angled away until all that showed was the line of her cheekbone, a breeze lifting strands of hair off the back of her neck.

There was a picture of Steve.

He was turned toward the camera, smiling slightly, lips parted as though he was about to speak. His cap was tucked under his arm; he

was bareheaded, and a lock of hair fell softly across his forehead. His gaze was so direct that she could almost imagine that he was looking out of the picture at her.

“Oh,” Nancy said softly, reaching out involuntarily as the picture sharpened in the developing fluid. Jonathan glanced at her, then quickly looked away.

In 10th grade Social Studies, Mrs. Lopez had talked about cultures that believed that a photograph could steal a person’s soul, or strip it bare. Nancy always thought that a photo could bare more than a little of the photographer’s soul, too. Not every picture Jonathan took was pretty— some of them were downright strange, in fact— but he was an artist. He had an eye for beauty, when he wanted to.

She looked at Jonathan again. It was hard to tell in the reddish gloom of the darkroom, but she thought he might be blushing. His shoulders were hunched in. When she touched his arm, his muscles were as tight as piano wire.

She thought about the times she’d seen him watching Steve from across the cafeteria with an intensity that was intimately familiar. Thought about saying, *I think I might still love him. Sometimes I still think about kissing him.*

Sometimes I think you do, too.

It wasn’t the right time. Steve was missing. If they got him back—

When they got him back, she’d find a way to ask about it. For now, she just squeezed Jonathan’s shoulder. “It’s a nice picture.”

He gave her a brief, flickering smile. “Thanks.”

It was also the last of the graduation photos. The next one was a shot of the exterior of Steve’s house, captured from the backyard. It wasn’t quite the same angle as that last photo he’d taken of Barb, sitting alone by the pool, but it was close enough to put a chill down her spine. Then one of the entry hall, and a head-on shot of the telephone mounted to the wall, and then—

“Wait,” Nancy said, putting a hand out and then pulling it back

before it could touch the chemical solution. “What’s that?”

“What?” Jonathan peered at it.

It almost looked like a flaw in the film, a thin, ragged black line running through three-quarters of the photo, splitting an otherwise mundane view of the Harringtons’ front hallway in half. It bulged slightly at the center, radiating fine black lines like cracks or spider legs. Nancy leaned in, the chemical-sharp smell of developing fluid filling her nose. “What is that?”

“It wasn’t there when I took the picture,” Jonathan said. She was slightly relieved to see that he looked as freaked out as she felt.

“It looks like...”

“Yeah.”

Like a tear in the fabric of reality. Like the portal the demogorgon had come out of. Like something that could swallow a person up without a trace.

It was impossible to track the passing of time. Sometimes, it felt like he’d been here forever; sometimes, it seemed like just seconds ago that he’d been in his familiar house, talking to Dustin about Dungeons and Dragons.

He’d stopped yelling for help. Nobody answered, and it was getting harder and harder to tamp down the churning panic in his gut every time he called out and got only stifling silence in response.

The space around him seemed limitless. He’d tried walking until he found a perimeter— a wall— something— but there was nothing, and it didn’t take long to realize that there was no way of keeping track of where he was in relation to where he’d started, anyway. The space could have been the size of a decently large house, or a football field. Or maybe it went on forever. There was no way to tell.

Worse, he was starting to think he might be hallucinating. There were odd echoes, skittering noises at the edges of hearing that stopped as soon as he tried to focus on them, strange twisting shapes appearing in the blackness, visible only out of the corners of his eyes.

Something cold brushed against his bare shin, and Steve kicked out at it. His foot met only air.

“Damn it,” he muttered, hating the thin, scared sound of his voice, hating that he almost wished that the thing, whatever it was, would just attack him already. At least then he could fight it. “Come on, you fucker, come and get me.”

At least then he’d know that there was something else here. The alternative was that he was cracking up.

He dug his fingernails into the inside of his arm again. The skin was already tender, bruised, and he was pretty sure he was actually bleeding in a couple of spots.

Stupid. If there was something in here with him, blood would only draw it. But nothing came at him. No claws, no teeth, no strange, cold, there/not there thing brushing up against him in the darkness.

“Jesus christ,” Steve muttered. “Goddamn it, come on. Where the hell are you?”

Something skittered away into the distance, and then there was only silence.

Jim got back to the station with a pounding headache to find two sets of frantic kids clamoring for his attention.

“There you are,” said Dustin Henderson, popping out of his seat like he was spring-loaded. “We’ve been waiting for hours.”

“More like twenty minutes,” muttered the Sinclair kid, elbowing him.

“Details,” said Dustin, shoving him back. “Did you find Steve?”

“Does it look like I found him?” Jim snapped, and regretted it immediately when Dustin flinched, his momentary animation sagging into abject misery.

Jane, more accustomed to his complete inability to act like a civil human being most of the time, shook her head. “No. You didn’t find

him.”

“No,” Jim agreed, and dropped into his chair, wishing— not for the first time in the past week— that he still had kept a hip flask at his desk. “I didn’t.”

“But you saw something,” she added calmly.

“I saw...” he shook his head. No use getting the kids’ hopes up, especially when he couldn’t even be sure that it had been Steve on the other end of the line.

Who the hell else it could be, he didn’t know. He knew that Al Newman’s phone had been fried in a way that looked exactly like the phone at the Harrington place, and he knew that Doc Owens swore up and down that nothing else had gotten loose at the lab, and he knew that Steve Harrington had been missing for three goddamn days, and that was about the upper limit of his grasp on this fucking situation.

“I don’t know what I saw,” he said, instead, and raised his eyebrows at Jonathan Byers and the Wheeler girl, sitting quiet and tense a few seats down from the rowdy middle-schoolers. Will Byers was perched anxiously on a chair in between the two, a tenuous sort of middleman. “Why are you here?”

Jonathan’s fingers curled around the file folder in his lap, and he glanced at Nancy. “We, um.”

“We think we might have found something,” Nancy interjected. “Can we talk?” She glanced over at Flo, who was typing up a report on the other side of the room and pointedly ignoring all of them. “Privately?”

“Sure,” Jim said after a long moment, and tilted his chin at the conference room. “C’mon.”

Jonathan and Nancy stood up, and so did all six of the younger kids. Jim pointed a finger at them. “Ah, ah, ah, I don’t think so. Sit your asses down.”

“But—” Mike started.

“Am I speaking Japanese? Sit down.”

Mike took an angry breath, clearly about to launch into some kind of defiant retort, but it was Dustin who spoke first. “Do they have pictures?” He looked over at Nancy and Jonathan. “You guys took pictures, right? And they show something weird?”

Jonathan hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Dustin said, nodding to himself. And then, to Jim, “Steve is like Schrödinger’s cat.”

“What,” Jim said flatly.

“Schrödinger’s cat,” Dustin repeated, and raised his eyebrows. “Observer effect. Let us in and I’ll explain it.”

Jim stared at him, and Dustin stared right back, clearly perfectly prepared to have a battle of wills that they *did not have time for* right there in the middle of the station.

“Fine,” he said eventually, bowing to the inevitable. Railroaded by a goddamn thirteen-year-old. How was this his life. “Let’s go.”

“We have pictures,” Nancy said, spreading blown-up black-and-white shots across the conference room table. Jim leaned over, peering at them. There were shots of the exterior of the Harrington house, shots of the hallway where he’d been less than an hour ago. He cut a glance at Jonathan, who was twisting his hands together in a way that was eerily reminiscent of Joyce and avoiding his eyes.

“You broke into the house?” That explained the muddy footprints on the entry hall carpet, in a house that certainly had the regular benefit of a cleaning service. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Never mind. Of course you did. What did you find?”

Nancy shuffled through the pictures, clearly looking for something. “Here,” she said finally, pulling one out of the stack. Jim leaned over to look at something that should have been a crease or a flaw in the film, but clearly wasn’t.

“What the hell,” he said softly.

“That wasn’t there when I took the picture,” Jonathan said. “Or, I mean, I didn’t see it. I thought I felt something, but it wasn’t... it could have been my imagination.”

“No,” Jim said absently. “It wasn’t your imagination. Is this the only one it shows up in?”

“I think so.”

Dustin approached the table, leaned over to examine the picture. The rest of the younger kids were hanging back by the door, wearing expressions of varying degrees of bafflement, except for Will, who slipped over to his brother, leaning against him with one shoulder like he wanted a hug but couldn’t quite bring himself to compromise his fragile middle-schooler dignity in public to ask for it. Jonathan ruffled his hair briefly, then slung an arm over his shoulders.

“Observer effect,” Dustin murmured again, in a softly revelatory tone of voice. He rested his fingers on the photo, just over the inky crack in thin air, and looked up at them. “I think I might have an idea of how to get Steve back.”

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

A/N: Okay, this was originally supposed to be three chapters, but I'm splitting the last one for length. Chapter 4 should be up in the next couple of days.

"No," Hopper said. "Not happening."

"It was my idea." Dustin set his jaw. Arguing with the Chief was different than arguing with his mom, or with Mr. Clarke. It wasn't just that he was a hulking bear of a man, although that was part of it; it was this feeling about him, a sense of controlled violence simmering beneath his skin. Hopper was one terrifying son of a bitch, and the worst part was, Dustin was pretty sure he didn't even do it on purpose.

But it was for Steve. He'd take on something a lot scarier than one grouchy police chief for Steve.

"The answer is no," Hopper said flatly. Dustin opened his mouth to argue, and Hopper glared him into silence, then said, "I had to tell Steve Harrington's father that his son is missing. That's not a conversation I want to have with anyone else tonight, do you understand me?"

Steve's father, from what Dustin had seen, probably couldn't have cared less that his son was missing. But he had enough common sense — just barely — not to say that out loud.

"I said," the Chief repeated, "do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Dustin said finally, sullenly.

"Good. *If* we can get the gate opened again, I'll go in after him. *Alone.*"

"But what if—"

"No 'what if'. Joyce will be here in a couple of minutes and you're

going with her. And if I find any of you trying to sneak back out to the house, I will arrest you and you can spend the night in a holding cell. Do I make myself clear?”

“Can he even—” Lucas started, then stopped when the Chief turned his glare on him. “Uh, yessir. Very clear.”

“I’d *rather* spend the night in jail than at my house,” Max said. That was probably actually true. “That would be badass.”

“There are no private toilets,” Hopper pointed out, to a chorus of disgust, as Mrs. Byers pulled her little car into a parking space in the empty lot out front, headlights sweeping across the station windows.

“But you’re letting Jane stay,” Dustin said, looking over at where she and Mike were saying a quiet, private goodbye by the door, completely ignoring the rest of them like the romantic saps they were. It was a weak last-ditch effort, and he knew it.

“Jane can take care of herself. Looks like your ride’s here, let’s go.”

“There’s no way we’re all going to fit in that car.”

“My mom’s taking my car,” Jonathan interjected. Traitor. “It’s bigger. We’ll ride over with the Chief.”

Dustin looked at him, and then at the rest of the party, and then up at the Chief’s implacable face, and felt something inside him sag. “Okay,” he said finally. “Just, look— take a radio, okay, take one of our radios, and let us know if you find him, or if you need anything, or—”

He was babbling. He was babbling, and he was an idiot, and he’d already contributed everything useful he could to the mission in the form of half-baked guesswork about what might make the portal show itself. If he went along, he’d be in the way at best, and a liability at worst. He knew that. It was just—

It was Steve.

“Hey,” Hopper said, oddly gentle, and rested his hand on Dustin’s shoulder for a moment. “We’ll get him back, okay?”

“Okay,” Dustin said in a small voice.

“And that’s a good idea, with the radios. This thing already fried the phones.”

“You can take mine,” Will piped up, unclipping it from his belt and holding it out. Hopper took it, inspected the controls for a moment, then nodded and attached it to his own belt.

“Okay,” he said, straightening, surveying the rag-tag band of them spread out across the empty police station. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Jonathan got Will safely stowed in the backseat, crowded together with Dustin and Mike and Lucas. Max, either by virtue of being the only girl or because she was meaner than the rest of them, had claimed shotgun. He pushed the door closed, and turned to see his mom standing behind him, looking hunched and anxious in the yellow glow of the streetlamp. “Jonathan...”

“Mom, no,” he said. “I have to do this.”

His mom reached for his hands, chafed them between her cold palms, sighed. “I know you do, honey,” she said eventually.

“What?”

“I’m not blind, you know. I can see that you— well. That you care about him.”

“*What?*” Jonathan said again, stupidly.

“Joyce,” Hopper called from the other side of the parking lot. “Hey, Joyce, c’mere a second.”

She let go of his hands, squeezed his shoulder, and released him, stepping back to where Hopper was standing. The two of them bent their heads together, conversing quietly.

I can see that you care about him. It sounded like— but she couldn’t mean— he didn’t—

Jonathan shoved his hands in his pockets and lifted his head, looking for Nancy. She was stepping down from the front stoop, her hair pulled back in a sloppy ponytail that left her slender neck bare, wearing a Hawkins PD windbreaker over her t-shirt and shorts. There was a heavy lump dragging at the right-hand pocket. She smiled at him as she approached.

“Gun?” he asked, nodding at it.

She nodded, resting her hand on it, but didn’t pull it out. Probably smart, with a carful of kids yelling and shoving at each other a few feet away. “Hopefully we won’t need it, but...”

“Yeah.” He wasn’t banking on it. This was Hawkins, after all. “I wish we had the nail bat.”

Not just because it would have been handy, although it would have. It was Steve’s weapon, and some superstitious part of him felt like it might bring him back to them. He didn’t know how to even begin explaining that to Nancy, though, so he didn’t try.

“Yeah,” Nancy said, looking up at him with wide, dark eyes, clearly about to say something else when his mom reappeared. Her mouth snapped shut.

“Okay, honey,” his mom said, oblivious. Intentionally so, maybe. She reached for his hand, squeezed it. “I want you to promise me—*promise me*— that you’ll be careful.”

Jonathan nodded. “I promise.”

“Good.” She looked at Nancy, then reached out and squeezed her hand too. “You too. I want both of you to be careful.”

“We will,” Nancy said.

“Good,” his mom said again. She was squeezing hard enough that it actually hurt his fingers, hard enough that it almost hid the way she was trembling. Jonathan hesitated, then wrapped her into a tight hug.

“We’ll be fine, Mom,” he said into her hair. “I promise.”

She squeezed back fiercely, then released him, wiping her eyes. “Of course you will. Are the keys in the car?”

“Under the visor.”

“Okay.” She hesitated again, then nodded and circled the car to climb in. Jonathan watched as she started the engine and pulled off onto the dark road, and then Hopper came up beside them, Jane trailing in his wake like a pale, silent shadow.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Nancy said. “We’re ready.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

Steve’s house was dark when they pulled up, his car still parked crookedly in the driveway. Nancy paused as they walked past it, leaning down to peer into the back window.

Hopper paused too, on the top step, looking impatient, Jane a step or two behind him. “Hey, let’s go.”

“Hang on a second,” she said calmly, and opened the back door, leaning in to rummage through something out of sight. After a moment, quietly satisfied, she said, “Ha. I thought so.”

She straightened up and shut the door. In her hand—

“Huh,” Jonathan said, as she twirled the nail bat once, showily, then held it out to him handle first. He took it. It was weighted like a weapon, the nails he’d pounded into it bent at odd angles, dark gory stains that had to come from the Upside-Down monsters marring the smooth wood at the head. He twirled it too, getting a feel for it. It felt good in his hand. Steve’s weapon, but he’d carry it for now.

“He usually keeps it in the trunk,” Nancy said, as they climbed up the steps. “But I thought I’d check.”

“I don’t want you kids fighting anything,” Hopper said, eyeing the pair of them. “If we get the portal open and something comes

through it, you run. Understand?”

“Sure,” Nancy said. She was lying. Jonathan could tell she was lying, and apparently Hopper could too, because he snorted, sounding annoyed, before flicking the hallway light on and leading the three of them down to where Steve had disappeared.

That was okay. He wasn’t going anywhere either, not until they got Steve back.

“Okay,” Hopper said, stopping in front of the crushed soda can on the floor. “This is the spot. Do your stuff.”

Jonathan unlooped the camera from around his neck. This one wasn’t his; this was the police department’s Polaroid. Instant film. Dustin’s brilliant idea.

“So, look, you were developing film, and the Chief almost got caught in the rift, right? And that happened at basically the exact same time. Just being there isn’t enough, but the act of recording it collapses the singularity. If the photo develops instantly, we can open the rift in real time.”

“You think.”

“I know,” Dustin said, with the supreme confidence of a very smart middle-schooler.

Jonathan was a lot less confident, but he hoped like hell that Dustin was right. Otherwise they were pretty well out of options.

“So, should I just—?” He gestured vaguely at the empty hallway.

“Why are you asking me?” the Chief said. “Take a picture, see what happens.”

Feeling more than a little stupid, Jonathan lifted the camera, pointed it vaguely at the family portrait across the hall, and snapped a picture. Nothing happened. The camera whirled softly and spit out the photo, and Jonathan waved it in the air to dry as the image emerged.

An empty hallway, a stiff portrait of Steve with his mom and dad inside a gilded frame. No black void splitting it in two. No rift. The air was still.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Try again.”

Jonathan took another picture. Then another, and another; all of them showing the exact same scene. Nancy was shifting back and forth on her heels, obviously trying not to look impatient and just as obviously failing at it. Hopper had his arms crossed tightly across his chest. Only Jane looked unmoved, her head tilted away to look at something in the darkened kitchen.

“It’s not *working*,” Jonathan said, frustrated, as the camera spit out a fifth identical photograph. “Nothing’s happening.”

“There,” Jane said suddenly, quietly, pointing across the room.

Jonathan squinted, but all he could see was the kitchen sink, the window above it letting in an indistinct yellow light from the streetlamp, the gleam of metal fixtures. “Where? I don’t see anything.”

“There,” she insisted, jabbing her finger at the mundane scene. “Right there.”

It wasn’t like anything else had worked. Jonathan sighed and lifted the camera again.

“There’s nothing...” he began, as the image began to emerge. “Wait.”

Hopper loomed over him to peer at it. “What is it?”

“I’m not sure,” Jonathan said, but Nancy was crowding close too, and he *was* sure, he could see it: a thin black line cracking the picture in half.

He lowered the camera, looking back at the kitchen. For a moment, the scene seemed normal, and then something wavered in thin air, a distortion like he was looking through a rain-drenched window, and

a gust of icy air blew through the room, lifting the hair off of his forehead.

The Chief started toward the distortion, but before he could take more than a couple of steps, there was a sudden, percussive *crack*. A burst of air like a freight train picked Jonathan up and flung him back against the wall hard enough that he saw stars. There was a sharp sound of shattering glass.

Jonathan shook his head, punch-drunk and dizzy, and climbed back to his feet, steadied himself on the wall. Nancy was crumpled in a heap beside him, looking dazed. The Chief was beside her, flat on his back, unmoving, blood seeping from a split on his forehead. Jane had her back against the wall, shaking her head slowly back and forth like she was trying to clear water from her ears.

In the kitchen, where seconds ago there had been only a countertop with a row of decorative bowls set across it, was the rift: a wavering, inky crack in thin air, so black that it swallowed all the light around it, the edges crackling and uneven in a way that made his eyes hurt to look at.

“Wow,” he whispered. “It worked.”

Beside him, Nancy clamored to her feet, side-stepped Hopper’s supine body, and approached the void. “Steve?”

There was no response. The rift wavered, the edges of it stretching and then shrinking as though moved by the breath of some enormous beast, but there was no response. Jonathan hadn’t realized until just that moment how desperately he was hoping that Steve would just tumble out onto the floor, as if they were opening the door to an over-full closet.

The Chief had been right, apparently. Someone was going to have to go in there after him.

That someone wasn’t going to be Hopper, though. Jane was leaning over him, patting his cheek, his chest, her hands skimming over him frantically. He wasn’t moving. The camera, which had been torn out of Jonathan’s hands by the blast, lay on the floor beside him, beneath

a dent where it must have slammed into the wall, the casing cracked, the film pack spilling out onto the floor. They wouldn't taking any more pictures with it.

"Is he okay?" Jonathan asked, belatedly concerned.

"He's alive," Jane said without looking up, which wasn't exactly what he'd asked but was reassuring nonetheless. Sort of. Hopper had always seemed indestructible, and it was more than a little disconcerting to see him so limp and still and helpless, his face slack, a thin trickle of blood staining his sandy hair.

"Jonathan," Nancy said, with an edge in her voice that made him look up. "Look."

For a moment, he couldn't tell what she was talking about, and then he realized: the rift was shrinking. It had stretched almost all the way to the ceiling a moment ago; now, it was barely as tall as Jonathan, and narrowing fast.

"It's closing," he murmured. Glanced at the broken camera again. Without it, they wouldn't be able to re-open the rift. Steve would still be trapped in there.

"Come on," Nancy said. She patted the pocket of her jacket as though reassuring herself that the gun was still there, and started toward the shrinking rift.

"What? Nancy, no, don't—"

"I'm not leaving him in there," she said fiercely. "You don't have to come with me, but I'm going."

Of course she was. She was Nancy. And there was no way he could let her go alone. He picked up the nail bat from where it had been leaning against the wall, shouldered it, and hesitated for a moment, paralyzed by a sudden fear. "They'll need another camera to get it open again."

If it would even *work* a second time, but he couldn't allow himself to consider that, or he'd never be able to make himself move. He had to move. The alternative was consigning Nancy and Steve both to that

horrible void alone.

Jane was still kneeling over the Chief, her pale fingers on his throat, her face white and drawn as she looked up at him. "I'll call the others," she said. "I'll tell them. Go. It's closing. Go."

"Jonathan, come *on*," Nancy said, holding a hand out to him. Jonathan looked up at her, and then at the rift behind her, shrinking to a slit even as he watched, and then he took her hand and let her pull him up, and *through*, and together they tumbled into the inky blackness.

They were turning the corner onto Elm street when the radio crackled. Dustin reached for it, but Lucas was faster. "Hello? Over."

A crackling silence, and then, "Hello?"

"That's Jane," Will murmured, and something like a stone dropped into the pit of Dustin's stomach. He reached over and snatched the radio out of Lucas's hands.

"Jane? It's Dustin. We're still in the car. What happened?"

Another crackling silence, and then she said. "It knocked him out. We need another camera."

"What? Who? It knocked who out? Hopper?"

"Yes. We need another camera." A pause, and then she added, "They went into the rift. Nancy and Jonathan, they went into the rift."

"Holy shit, you mean it *worked*?" Dustin asked, momentarily elated. Then the rest of the sentence registered. "What do you mean you need another camera? Is it— did it *close* with them in it?"

"Yes."

"*Shit*," he said vehemently. He could see Mrs. Byers watching him in the rearview mirror, but seriously, there were so much bigger issues right now. "Did something— is the camera broken?"

“Yes,” Jane said again.

“Oh, shit, this is not good. This is so not good. Uh, we’ll get a camera, we’ll be right there, okay?”

“Give me the radio,” Mrs. Byers said suddenly, pulling the car over to the curb. In the mirror, her face was bone-white and tense. Startled, Dustin passed it up to her without even thinking. She lifted it to her mouth. “Jane, honey? You said that Nancy and Jonathan went into the rift. Is Jim— is the Chief okay?”

There was another, worryingly long silence, and then Jane said, sounding somehow smaller, “I think so. I’m taking care of him. I’ll take care of him.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” Mrs. Byers said, and her voice was gentle and soothing even though her expression was awful. “Okay. You’re doing so well. You’re doing such a good job, and we’ll be right there, okay?”

“Okay,” Jane said, and cut the transmission. Mrs. Byers set the radio down on the center console, then slammed both of her fists into the dashboard hard enough to make them all jump.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she said, and took a deep, shaky breath.

Will leaned forward and put his hand on her arm; she reached back and clung to him. Dustin looked at the two of them, opened his mouth, considered the odds of actually saying the right thing, and shut it again. “Where the hell,” he managed eventually, “are we going to get another Polaroid camera at eight o’clock at night?”

This time, it was Mike who spoke. “My mom has one.”

There was a long moment in which they all looked at each other, and then Mrs. Byers let go of Will’s hand, put the car back in drive, and said, “Okay. Let’s go.”

They pulled up next to the curb at Mike’s house. Mike climbed over Dustin and Lucas to get out the door and sprinted up the walk and into the house. A few minutes later, he re-emerged, clutching a black

case, and pelted back down the driveway. His mom appeared in the open doorway in a dressing gown, yelling, “Mike, get back here, *this instant*—”

Mike dove into the backseat, landing sprawling across all three of them, and Max leaned over to yank the door shut. “Drive! *Go!*”

“Oh, my god,” Max yelled, as Mrs. Byers peeled away from the curb. “Did you get it?”

“Yeah, I got it!” Mike yelled back, and then, “I’m gonna be grounded for a month.”

“You’re not going to be grounded,” Mrs. Byers said, gripping the wheel so hard that her knuckles were white. “I’ll talk to your mom.”

Privately, Dustin was skeptical about how much that was likely to help, given that she was the one *driving the getaway car*, but he held his tongue.

Lucas didn’t. “You are *so* going to be grounded.” He socked Mike’s shoulder, grinning. “Totally worth it, though.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, and he let his head drop back on Will’s knee, and started laughing, clearly punchy with adrenaline and success. “Totally.”

“Boys,” Mrs. Byers said, and the tension in her voice made Mike’s laughter fade. He pulled himself upright— as upright as he could, anyway, with about three inches worth of seat free— as Mrs. Byers peered into the backseat at them. Max, who had been twisted around to look at them, sat back down with a thump. “Where are we going? I don’t have the address.”

“I do,” Dustin offered. “It’s pretty close by, actually.”

“Good,” she said tightly. “Tell me where to go.”

4. Chapter 4

Jonathan landed hard on his side, just barely having the presence of mind to swing the nail bat out so he didn't impale himself. He wheezed, then rolled, pressing his hands to the cool surface beneath him, lifting his head, trying to orient himself. The blackness around was so complete that he might as well have been a pair of floating eyeballs for all he could see of his surroundings.

"Are you okay?" Nancy asked softly.

He nodded, then realized there was no way she'd be able to see it. "Yeah. You?"

"I think so." He could hear rustling, a soft frustrated noise, and then she said, "I don't know why we didn't bring a flashlight."

Jonathan let out a breath of laughter. "Next time we'll remember."

"I really hope there's not going to be a next time," Nancy said dryly. Her voice was coming from above him; she'd stood up. Jonathan got his hands under him and gingerly followed suit. It was weirdly hard to find his balance without any visual cues; the surface beneath him seemed flat, but it could have been tilted in any direction and he wouldn't have been able to tell.

He steadied himself, shuffled in a slow circle, peering into the blackness. "Can you see—"

There were sudden fast footsteps approaching, and then something barreled into him from the side, knocking him flat on his back. The nail bat rolled away from his fingers. Instinctively, Jonathan threw his arm up, expecting a toothy maw to clamp down on it, expecting the bite of claws. It didn't come. Instead, something hit him very hard in the midsection. Then again, in the chest, the face, random, poorly aimed blows that were still enough to hurt like hell. Jonathan struck out with his free hand, and felt—

Cloth. A t-shirt, and a warm, human, *familiar* body underneath it.

“Steve?” he asked.

Steve— it was Steve, it had to be Steve— froze, then threw himself backwards, off of Jonathan, and scrambled away. When he spoke his voice was almost unrecognizable. “Jonathan? Shit, what the *fuck*, Jonathan, what the hell are you doing here?”

Jonathan opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, Steve said, “Jesus christ, you’re not here, you’re not really here, what the fuck —”

He was moving backwards, by the sound of his voice, and fast. Still muttering, frantic, almost incoherent, “You’re not here, you’re not here, you’re *not here*—”

“We’re here, Steve.” That was Nancy’s voice, coming from behind him. She sounded preternaturally calm. “We came after you. We’re going to get you home.”

Steve laughed, raw and hysterical. “How the hell are you going to do that?” And then, before she could answer, “Oh, my god, I really am losing my mind.”

“Steve—”

“I mean, I’d rather be hallucinating you guys than, like— more fucking monsters in the dark, but—”

“*Steve*,” Jonathan said again. He moved carefully forward, hands held out like a sleepwalker, tracking Steve by the sound of his breathing. Finally, his hands brushed cloth. He grabbed on before Steve could flinch away again, and then, lacking any other ideas, hauled him into a bear-hug.

Steve recoiled almost hard enough to pull them both down in a tangle of limbs, and then, before Jonathan could even begin to berate himself or let go, flung his arms around Jonathan, more like a drowning man clinging to a life preserver than anything like an embrace. His strong fingers dug into Jonathan’s back in a way that was actually kind of painful, his face pushed in Jonathan’s shoulder, a dampness that wasn’t, *couldn’t* be tears soaking through his t-shirt.

“Jesus,” he said raggedly, into Jonathan’s shirt. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

He didn’t pull away, so Jonathan carefully rubbed a hand up and down his back, making slow, soothing circles like did when Will was having a nightmare.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, although Steve was shaking uncontrollably, obviously pretty fucking far from *okay* right now. If he’d really been trapped here alone in this endless dark for three days, Jonathan couldn’t blame him for that.

“Steve,” Nancy said quietly from his left, and then her hand was patting across Jonathan’s back, up to Steve’s shoulders, petting him clumsily too, her fingers bumping Jonathan’s. “We’re here. We’re really here, it’s not a hallucination, I promise.”

“Nance,” Steve said weakly, and then one of his hands left Jonathan’s back to pull her into an awkward, three-way hug, shoulders bumping, Jonathan’s arm crushed between them. They stayed like that, swaying slightly, until Steve stopped shaking. Finally, he lifted his head from Jonathan’s shoulder, leaving a damp spot behind, and said, in a somewhat more normal voice, “Uh. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Nancy said. “Are you okay now?”

“Define ‘okay’,” Steve said on a breath of uneasy laughter.

“Here,” she said, lifting her other arm, something sharp scraping briefly across the outside of Jonathan’s jeans. The nail bat. She’d grabbed the nail bat when he’d dropped it, and it was a damn good thing, too, since in this darkness the only way they were going to find anything they dropped was if they tripped over it. “Maybe this will help.”

Steve shifted, finally letting go of Jonathan, and stepped back. The spot where he’d been felt oddly cold.

“Huh,” he said, and then, “The nail bat? You brought the nail bat.”

“I figured you could use it.” There was a smile in her voice.

“Good,” Steve said. “Because, uh, if you guys are real, then maybe

I'm not hallucinating, and that means... that means there's something in here with us. It's been circling for the past— shit, I don't know, at least a few hours. I thought I might have just been imagining it, but..."

Jonathan tilted his head, listening. He could hear Steve's breathing, and Nancy's. The soft shifts of their clothing, the pulse of his own heartbeat. And— something else. A whisper of sound, just at the edge of his hearing, a dry, inhuman skittering in the distance.

"I don't think you were imagining it," he said.

"Great," Steve muttered, but he actually sounded perversely relieved. "I hope you guys have a plan for getting us out of here before whatever it is decides we smell like dinner."

His shoulder bumped Jonathan's as he stepped closer, and Jonathan didn't move away. He was already starting to feel on-edge, and even that small bit of human contact helped. How the hell Steve had survived three days here by himself was beyond him.

On his other side, Nancy moved closer too. Her elbow bumped him as she dug in her pocket, probably for the gun. Jonathan didn't know how much use it was going to be when she couldn't see to aim, but it still made him feel better that she had it.

"We're working on it. Or at least, the others are. They'll get us out of here." Jonathan was pretty sure that the calm confidence in her voice was at least partly for show, but he envied it all the same. "In the meantime..."

"Don't get eaten," Steve interjected, and the humor in his voice sounded more genuine now.

Nancy laughed quietly. "Exactly."

"So," Steve said, then stopped.

"What?" Nancy asked. The grip of the pistol felt slick in her hands, and she was suddenly, incredibly glad for the quick and dirty firearms training Hopper had inflicted on her after their last run-in

with the Upside-Down. She wasn't an expert, but at least she could load and unload a gun without having to see what she was doing. She had two spare magazines in her pocket.

Whether or not she'd be able to actually hit anything was another story altogether.

"Sh," Steve said. And then, quieter, "Do you hear that?"

Jonathan made a quiet affirmative noise. He was still and tense between them, the only one without a weapon, and she realized with an odd pang that she and Steve had flanked him automatically, taking up protective positions without even thinking about it.

Nancy opened her mouth, then shut it. In the distance, so quiet that she could almost convince herself it wasn't real, was a scraping sound, an odd, inhuman sound like something with too many legs moving out there in the distance.

She listened for several moments, breathing as shallowly as she could.

"I think it's circling us," Jonathan whispered, and he was right, damn it, he was right: the sound had been in front of them a moment ago, but now it was coming from her left, and she was pretty sure it wasn't her imagination that it was getting closer.

"Shit," Steve murmured. "Oh, shit, why did you guys come in here?"

"To save your stupid ass," Jonathan hissed. Nancy would have elbowed him if she wasn't too busy trying to track the sound, aiming with both hands on the gun toward the thing that was edging closer in the darkness.

She'd never be able to hit it blind. She knew that, but still...

"I didn't ask you to come after me," Steve hissed back.

"You're such a—"

"Shut *up*," Nancy said through her teeth. "Both of you."

Something of her fear must have leaked through into her tone, because Jonathan shut his mouth instantly. Nancy tilted her head, tracking the noise. It was definitely getting closer.

“Shit,” Steve breathed again. They were moving slowly, shuffling to face the creature as it circled, keeping Jonathan between them. “Why doesn’t it just—”

No sooner had he spoken than the skittering movements stopped abruptly. It was hard to estimate distance in the total blackness, but Nancy thought it couldn’t be more than ten yards away.

There was just a moment of silence, and then the thing was moving with sudden, purposeful speed. Nancy fired twice, the report of the gun deafening, and then there was a huff of icy breath on her skin and teeth like needles clamped down on her upper leg. She yelped, kicking out at it, heard Jonathan and Steve yell her name almost in unison, and then something slammed into the thing from the side, knocking it off of her and rending flesh in its wake. There was another solid, wet impact, and she could imagine Steve spinning the bat in his hands, swinging at the unseen monster in a brutal, graceful arc like he was knocking a ball out of Bush Stadium.

“Nancy, are you okay? *Nancy?*”

That was Jonathan’s voice, and he sounded frantic. His hands patted at her— arms, shoulders, hip, injured leg. She sucked a pained breath through her teeth, then said, “I’m fine. It’s not that bad, I’m okay.”

She hoped that was true. She could still put weight on the leg, which meant it couldn’t be *that* bad, even though she could feel hot blood flowing over her knee, down her calf, cooling as soaked into her sock.

There was another impact, and an inhuman screech, and then the sound of the creature skittering off into the distance.

“Nancy?” That was Steve. He was breathing hard, and he sounded just a few degrees shy of panicked himself. “Did it— are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, through gritted teeth. It hurt, a lot, and she was really wishing that she could forget everything she’d ever heard in

health class about animal bites and how they needed to be washed immediately, how they were prone to horrible infections. And that was just from *cats*; who the hell knew what that thing had in its mouth. “It’s just—” She didn’t want to worry them, she didn’t, but— “It’s just, my leg, it’s bleeding a lot.”

“Shit,” Steve said, and then there was a rustling noise, a shift of cloth, and he was pushing something into her hands. His t-shirt, still warm from his body. “Here. Press this down over it.”

“Shouldn’t we wrap it around her leg?” Jonathan asked. “Like a, a tourniquet?”

“Nope. Cuts off circulation. It could destroy the tissue.”

“How the hell do you know all that?” Jonathan’s hands were over hers, larger and at least slightly steadier, helping her hold the makeshift bandage in place. The cloth was already sodden, squishing horribly beneath her fingers, and the bleeding didn’t seem to be slowing any.

Anticoagulants, she thought. Some kinds of leeches and bats had anticoagulants in their saliva, to keep the blood from clotting while they fed. The human body held approximately five liters of blood, she remembered that from Bio last year, but she didn’t know how much of that she could afford to lose.

That seemed, suddenly, like it would have been important information to know.

“First aid class,” Steve said. He actually seemed a lot steadier now, with something to do. Something to fight.

“You took a first aid class?”

“Yeah, they had one at the firehouse.” Steve was moving as he spoke, circling the two of them. “Seemed like a good idea, considering... you know, *everything*.”

It was hard to argue with that. “Did you,” Nancy said, then stopped, wincing, as Jonathan pressed down on the bite. The t-shirt was soaked through already, and she couldn’t help thinking that if that

thing was still around, or if there were more than one of them, blood would only draw it. “Did you get it, do you think?”

“It was still moving pretty damn fast,” Steve said. “Hopefully, we scared it off for good, but if not—”

He didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t need to.

“Great,” Jonathan muttered.

“So,” Steve said, after a moment, clearly trying for levity and mostly failing. “Not that I don’t appreciate the rescue attempt, like, seriously, but you guys do have a plan for getting us out of here, right?”

“Dustin has a plan,” Jonathan said absently. “Nancy, I think the bleeding might be stopping.”

“*Dustin* has a plan?” Steve asked incredulously. “We’re all going to die.”

“He’s the one who figured out how to re-open the rift,” Nancy says. “He’s a smart kid.”

Steve was silent for a moment, then he said, “Yeah. Yeah, he really is. Still...” He broke off abruptly, then said, in a low, vehement voice, “Shit.”

Something was moving out in the dark.

“Do you think it’s the same one?” Jonathan whispered.

“Who the hell knows? Does it matter?”

Nancy steadied herself on Jonathan’s shoulder, lifting her gun. A few paces ahead of them, she could hear the soft swooping noises as Steve swung the bat back and forth.

Another breath of silence, and then the creature charged. She could see light glinting off a sinuous, scaly back, an eyeless face and a gaping mouth full of too many teeth—

She could *see*.

It was dim, but with her eyes adjusted to the blackness, the light was like a beacon. It was coming from behind Jonathan, a thin line of brightness that wavered unevenly, like—

—like the rift had—

“Steve!” she yelled, as he wound up and swung again. The thing dodged, fast as lightning, hissing up at him. It was vaguely feline in shape, hairless and scaly, twice as long as a man was tall and supported by way too many stumpy legs.

“Little busy here!” he snapped, side-stepping a lunge that came within inches of his bare shoulder and aiming another blow at the creature. This one connected, knocking it back several feet.

“The rift! Come on, come *on*—” She reached out unlooking for Jonathan, caught at his elbow, then his hand, clinging on as hard as she could, dragging his taller form back with her. Steve glanced over his shoulder at them, swore, and started stepping back, swinging the bat back and forth as a deterrent, sending sprays of blackish gore in every direction. As Nancy and Jonathan started toward the rift in an awkward, uneven run— her leg really *was* about to collapse— the creature lunged again. It was *fast*. And those thick, awkward-looking legs were more than sufficient to launch it several feet into the air.

Steve swung again, knocking it onto its side with a howl. “Go!” he yelled. “I’ll cover you guys!”

“That was *not* the plan,” Nancy yelled back, but Jonathan was dragging her back toward the rift, fast enough that it was all she could do to keep up with him.

“Steve,” he shouted. “Steve come on, let’s go, it’s not going to stay stable that long—”

“I am *working on it*,” Steve began, and then the thing dove under the arc of his bat to clamp its teeth down on his leg. It yanked, hard enough pull his feet out from under him. His head bounced off of the surface beneath him, and the nail bat rolled away from his fingers.

Nancy was aware of screaming his name, of taking a step back when her leg collapsed uselessly beneath her. It was too close to Steve for her to risk shooting at it.

The creature was snarling, dragging him backward while he kicked uselessly at it, when Jonathan let go of her hand and barreled into it, knocking it bodily off of him. It let go of Steve and rolled away, snarling, and he scooped up the nail bat and swung with all his might at its head. There was the sound of something *cracking*, and the creature went down and didn't move. When Jonathan jerked the bat loose, there was a revolting spray of gore, and some more solid chunks that had to be whatever passed for its skull.

He reached down to yank Steve up, then reached for Nancy as well, hauling her up onto her feet. "Come *on*."

The rift was wavering, shrinking, just like it had before. Jonathan was pulling them both forward, his fingers painfully tight. She could hear a chorus of voices shouting, too indistinct to make any sense out of them, but when Jonathan shoved her toward the rift there were hands reaching in to pull her back into the world. They collapsed into a heap on the floor just as the rift winked out of existence.

Head spinning dizzily, Nancy sat up.

It was very bright, and there seemed to be way more people than there should have been. Max Mayfield was still clinging to one of her hands, Mike to the other. Steve was on the floor, Jonathan sprawled across his lap, Joyce still gripping his wrists so tightly that her fingers were digging into his flesh.

A few feet away, Dustin Henderson stood frozen against the wall, a Polaroid camera clutched in his hands, his eyes enormous. "Holy shit," he whispered. "It worked. It totally worked."

That seemed to be the impetus the rest of them needed to break the strange tableau. Max let go of her wrist and sat back; Mike, on the other hand, pulled her into a tight, unexpected hug.

"That was really, really stupid," he said into her hair.

“Like you’re one to talk,” Nancy retorted, squeezing him back just as tightly.

“—do that again, don’t you *ever* do that again,” Joyce was saying. She’d let go of Jonathan’s wrists and was holding his face in her hands. “Ever. Do you understand me?”

“I’m okay, Mom,” Jonathan said, gently pulling her hands away. He rolled until he wasn’t sprawled on top of Steve, slid an arm under his back to help him up.

“Ugh, fuck my life,” Steve mumbled, tilting into him. The leg of his jeans was shredded and bloody, and his forearms were scattered with scratches. He was shaking like a leaf. The nail bat was about a foot away, leaking blackish gore all over the carpet.

“Steve?” Dustin had knelt down in front of him, looking wide-eyed and anxious.

“Hey, man,” Steve said, with a approximation of a smile. “I hear you got me out of there.”

“Yeah, it was the cameras, they collapse the singularity, they—” Dustin broke off abruptly and flung his arms around Steve. Nancy didn’t miss the way he winced, but he hugged back just as tightly.

Her leg was starting to ooze blood onto the carpet, but she edged over until she could lean against Steve’s other side. Jonathan’s arm was still around him, and Dustin was hitching hiccuping little breaths into his shoulder, like he wasn’t quite crying but also wasn’t very far off from it.

“Hey, bud,” Steve said, sounding softly baffled. “Hey, I’m okay. You guys did a great job, okay? You did great. Thank you.”

Dustin sniffled, rubbed his nose, and sat back. “I’m really glad you’re okay,” he said. “Really, really glad.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Yeah,” Dustin said. And then, rallying visibly, “So, you’re totally going to join the quest when you’re feeling better, right? These guys

don't appreciate my genius.”

Steve put his head back against the wall and started laughing quietly. “Yeah, okay,” he said eventually. “I’ll play your geek game.”

Dustin grinned and wiped his eyes. “Good.”

At some point, somebody went to call an ambulance, and she could hear Mrs. Byers and the Chief (sounding dazed but awake and basically coherent, thank God) murmuring together about a cover story. Nancy couldn't bring herself to pay very much attention. Steve's body was a warm, reassuringly solid line of heat against her side, and Jonathan's knuckles brushed her ribs, and after a while, she leaned her head against Steve's shoulder and just let herself drift.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks all for your wonderful comments! I had a blast writing this fic, and I hope you guys enjoyed reading it.

I have a shippy little epilogue starring our monster-hunting OT3, but it didn't quite fit with the tone of this, so I'm posting it separately.

Thanks for reading!